



Making Musical Connections

Paula O'Regan, QSM

Psychologist, Ministry of Education, Special Education, Marlborough/Kaikoura office

Storied Experience

Keywords

Behaviour management, educational programmes, learning experiences, music therapy, student achievement, teacher education, teaching strategies.

BACKGROUND

I didn't dare use the term "Music Therapy" in my title as I'm certainly not a registered music therapist, but the work I have done with children with special needs in the music field has been heavily influenced by a number of eminent music therapists. I have to say that this work has also been the most enjoyable and often the most exciting of all my experiences as an educationist.

An educationist! What a grandiose term! I started off as a classroom teacher and at that stage had no aspirations to be anything else. I loved the classroom and the kids I worked with and what I relished most of all was the opportunity I had to share my own passion for music with my students. Integrated programmes were encouraged and of course mine were always around musical themes. It was a great life, but there were even more exciting things to come.

Now relax! I'm not going to bore you with a blow-by-blow account of my progression from job to job but I will refer only to the three positions which led me to an awakening to the amazing power of music as both a learning and a therapeutic tool. Those three were teaching (naturally!), working as a music advisor and becoming a psychologist with what was then, the Psychological Service of the Department of Education.

As I appeared in certain schools as a psychologist instead of a music advisor, there was some confusion and then the question came, "what's the connection between music and psychology?" Well, I didn't know at that stage, did I, but I certainly found a connection eventually in the field of music therapy. But let's keep calling it music in special education at this stage.

I think it all started when I began working in a certain Special School in Dunedin. At the time, the School had a roll of just over 60 students and the staff knew that nearly all of them "just loved music". However, music sessions tended to be noisy, chaotic and frankly aimless. What could we do to use that love of music to promote the learning goals we wanted to reach and make the whole experience more enjoyable and satisfying for the students and less of a nerve-shattering experience for the staff?

I decided to focus on the seniors first and studied the group. At that time they had quite a high proportion of students with Down syndrome. So what did they bring to our music? Well, it certainly wasn't an awareness of pitch differences or an ability to reproduce melodies with a high degree of accuracy, so singing songs was not terribly rewarding for anybody. But what a great sense of rhythm most of them displayed! That was when I had my "Aha!" moment. Carl Orff, I thought, and the pentatonic scale!

I have used the good old pentatonic scale so often since then, and have shown so many teachers and teacher aides how to use it, that I must devote some time to it here. I am hoping that some of you will be inspired to rush off after you've read this and try it out.

The scale we normally use in Western music is the diatonic or 8 note scale. Use the wrong notes together and you get horrible discords. But remove the 4th and 7th notes and you can combine the remaining five in any order and you **cannot** create discords (and yes, 8-2 really does leave 5 when you remember that 8 is just a repetition of 1 an octave higher. Confused? Don't worry! You can test it out later!)

Carl Orff uses the Pentatonic Scale in his "Music for Children" programme and what's more he starts with only two notes and gradually builds up to the five. The two notes he uses are the 4th and the 3rd notes of the pentatonic scale (which would be the 5th and 3rd if we were using a diatonic scale) and they form a minor 3rd. When and if singing is introduced, he starts with only the two notes, so it's more of a chant than a melody. The instruments used are xylophones, glockenspiels and simple percussion instruments such as bells (the jingly kind), hand drums, etc. If you are finding it hard to follow this, think about the old chant "It's raining! It's pouring!" or the notes children use when they are teasing one another e.g. "I know your boyfriend!" Those are the first notes that are sung or played.

Our students were really good at mastering simple rhythmic phrases which they only had to repeat over and over. The school had one or two glocks and xylos; we used the music grant to get some more plus a basic set of versatile chime bars. We simply took out the 4th and 7th bars (oh yes, make sure you get the xylophones and glocks with removable bars – no sweat setting out the chime bars!) and away we went. If a wrong note was hit occasionally, it didn't really matter. Our more challenged students stuck to the untuned percussion and even the most disabled could have a bracelet of jingle bells on an elastic band, slipped over a wrist.

The instruments were accepted with enormous enthusiasm and slightly stunned yet pleased surprise by the teachers. But what really stayed in my mind was the astonishment and delight on the faces of the parents when we performed our first concert for them.

So what did these students actually gain from working on those very basic musical skills?

1. There was marked improvement in both fine and gross motor skills.
2. They learned to share and to turn take.
3. Listening skills definitely improved.
4. Self-esteem rose before our eyes.
5. They had so much fun!

I was able to step back at that point and leave it to school staff, to look at the abilities of their various groups, the goals they wanted to achieve and how music could be used to move towards those goals. Would it be through singing, instrumental work, movement, listening or exploring all of the above.

EARLY CHALLENGES

It was at that same school that I met my first music-lovers with autism spectrum disorder. I will call them Linda and Jason (not their real names). Neither one was very interested in group music sessions, but what did that tell us? Many years later in Hamilton a frustrated teacher appealed to me about the boy in her class who was severely challenged with autism. "His parents say he really loves music but he won't even stay in the classroom while we're having music!" I agreed to sit in to see what happened – **and** to listen! Afterwards, I said to the teacher, "Don't take offence, but I think it's **because** he loves music that he can't stay in the room during class music!" Well, have **you** ever really listened to some class music sessions?

Later, I settled myself out in the playground, a comfortable distance from Sam (another pseudonym) with a few carefully selected instruments on the ground around me. Eventually, it was the soft, muted tones of the autoharp that lured him closer and drew him into some tentative turn-taking with the instrument. In Sam's case, it was the blissful smile that lit up his face when **he** produced those sounds, that lingers in my mind.

But back to the two children I met in Dunedin. Linda was an 11 year old with a great deal of purely echolalic speech and the stiff, puppet-like movements that sometimes accompanies autism. She had a ready smile which often seemed directed at her own inner world. Linda and I began listening to music and soon I discovered that her preferences were for Strauss waltzes and Tchaikovsky's ballet music. She would either stand and simply conduct the music or she would dance around the room with extraordinarily graceful movements. But when the music stopped, the awkwardness returned and we never did succeed in transferring her musical achievements to daily life.

However, Linda learned some interesting skills which **were** transferable. When she saw me coming and carrying the portable record player (I told you it was a long time ago, didn't I?), she would run to meet me and take the player out of my hand. We would then walk together to the staffroom and she would set up the player, plug it in, take the record out of its sleeve with great care and set it on the turntable. She mastered all the steps to play her music and her fine motor skills seemed to improve quite rapidly. These skills did transfer to other situations and staff were able to extend her in other fine motor areas as well. Obviously too, the music could be used by anyone at home or in school to soothe her and relax her when she became tense or distressed.

Jason was a very different child in that he presented with extremely challenging behaviours. He was six years old and it was some considerable time before I saw him smile. He had no speech, was hyperactive, and frequently screamed, head-banged, bit other people and tried to run away. I worked regularly with Jason at the time, and had the scars to prove it. There is no space here to go into detail about our programme which was purely experimental but I discovered someone who could calm this child, silence the screams and still the compulsive physical motion – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart! Jason would come close to the player, sink onto a low easy chair strategically placed nearby, and sit there, slumped and relaxed with a faraway smile on his suddenly peaceful face. I felt a bit of a failure for not being able to do anything else for Jason through music until it was pointed out to me just how important it was to be able to get him to relax.

MEETING THE MUSIC THERAPISTS

By now I knew that there had to be more to all this. I needed far more skills and music-based insights than I possessed, and it was about then that I discovered that there was something called Music Therapy and there were people who could show me how to use music to achieve a wide range of goals.

The awakening began with the first visit to New Zealand of Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins in the '70s. Paul was a retired Professor of Music as well as a composer, and Clive was a teacher of the deaf who became interested in the wider field of special education. The two men met when Clive was working in that wider field at the Goldie Leigh Hospital in London. I was lucky enough to attend the course they ran in Christchurch. While the course was essentially practical with tapes of casework and practical demonstrations using groups of local children, it was based very firmly on the musical knowledge and expertise of Paul. Of course, implementing such a programme with two practitioners provided huge advantages. Clive Robbins had a warm, dynamic personality and the speed with which he was able to form a warm, interactive relationship with each child in a group situation was a revelation! Meantime Paul would be watching as well as providing the accompaniment and musical base for songs, movement or instrumental work. He would pick up on the vocal pitch used by an individual child or the rhythm of a child's walk and weave it into a simple greeting song for that particular child.

I went back from the course armed with the Nordoff and Robbins *Songs for Children* (mostly written to teach simple daily living skills or basic learning tasks), the musical game of “Pif-Paf-Poltrie” and the Christmas operetta about the fourth wise man. But I also had lots of ideas as to how I could use my own favourite music plus my teaching skills to help children learn, live and be happy. That’s what inspirational people do to you!

I haven’t described the work Paul and Clive did with individual children who were not able to respond in group settings. That was a revelation too, and tremendously exciting. The only opportunity I had to practise in that area was when I was given approval to set up a special project during my time as a lecturer at Dunedin Teachers’ College. I worked in conjunction with another staff member who was also a music enthusiast – but that’s a whole separate story!

I went to a number of music courses in the following years, thanks to the New Zealand Society for Music Therapy who arranged them, and to my district officers and managers who could see their value in equipping me with skills I could pass on to teachers. I learned from all of them. The only other presenter I will mention here is Maggie Pickett who was the Director of Music Therapy at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. From Maggie I learned many skills, but the one that had the greatest impact on me, was the confidence to improvise. “If you’re going to do this sort of work, you must be able to improvise”.

“I can’t improvise!” I protested.

“Everyone can improvise!” she responded imperiously and ordered me to go and sit at the piano. I obeyed. I put my hands on the keys wondering what would happen! I improvised. I don’t remember what my theme was or what I was trying to communicate but I do remember finishing to applause from my fellow course members and warm praise from Maggie.

I am relaying this incident because this is at the heart of using music as a therapeutic tool. It is all about presenting someone, child or adult, with a musical experience which will have meaning for them and will leave them with a sense of achievement and pride, as well as the pleasure of the experience itself.

WHAT CAN THE REST OF US DO?

Now I’m struggling, because I want to pick out the experiences from more recent years that might inspire some of you who are teaching to actually use music to supplement your current programme and help the students you teach to reach learning and behavioural goals in an enjoyable and non-threatening way. I haven’t used the term “non-threatening” before but it’s a really important one in this context. All the tutors I’ve worked with have emphasised that this is the key to using music with children who have challenges in intellectual, physical, emotional, behavioural or social areas – plus any combinations of the above. It is a non-threatening medium and you can start with a purely fun session as you get to know and understand one another. Then your skill has to be applied to use the music to teach the skills you need to develop in your student or students.

There are programmes you can follow, of course, like the “Take Note” programme produced by Gendie Jury and Sally Berg. I was fortunate enough to work with Gendie and Sally in the 1990s in presenting the programme in certain parts of the country and to help in the training of teachers at that time. My then manager (we were Specialist Education Services in those days!) was an enthusiastic supporter of the programme and was happy to release me from my duties as a psychologist to help introduce the techniques in Hawkes Bay, Canterbury, Otago and Southland as well as in my then home area of the Waikato.

Gendie and Sally set out to produce songs and activities which linked directly to curriculum areas and were designed also to develop social skills and build self esteem. Books, tapes and later a computer were part of the programme. This programme lends itself particularly well to an inclusive education programme.

I have encouraged a number of teachers over the years to experiment with the pentatonic scale. If you’re doing it vocally, start with that Minor 3rd that seems to occur naturally in children’s chants. Paul Nordoff said he’d worked with children in 56 countries and had not found any country where that chant didn’t occur in some form. He and Clive would use it to get a response from children who seemed remote and unreachable in any other way. I’ve heard teachers use it calling the roll and the children echo back the notes in their response.

If you’re a pianist or keyboard player, try the G above Middle C and the E below it. Then bring in the A above the G. Sing familiar rhymes or questions on those three notes. If you can get hold of Orff’s *Music for Children*, look at the way he introduces “Bobby Shaftoe”.

The full pentatonic scale on the piano white notes would be CDEGA. But if you just want a background for movement activities, or for relaxation, try the black notes, which give you a natural pentatonic scale and you don’t have to think about which note to hit! Yes, you can use both hands and play any of the notes in any combination and you won’t get any discords. That’s why you can give kids chime bars, xylophones and glockenspiels and just let them experiment as long as you’ve removed the 4th and 7th notes (F and B if you have that C Major scale). Just set a rhythm by clapping or using a hand drum. Instant improvisation at its simplest!

I don’t think this article was meant to be a teaching exercise but I can’t resist the urge to get some of you experimenting! It’s so rewarding when you see the reactions of the children, I know that some of you will have your own repertoire of music that links with maths, language, science, studies of other cultures (that’s an easy one!), etc. Some will also have sorted out favourite CDs that relax or activate, or musical games that help build social skills. You can use music at any level and regardless of your own level of musical expertise.

Most of us support and promote the philosophy of inclusive education. Music lends itself superbly to a truly inclusive programme. Whether you are using listening, movement, singing, instrumental work or any combinations of the above, it is a subject in which all students can participate at their own level and yet each child can feel part of the group.

Let me tell you just one more story. One young man I see regularly – I'll call him Tom - has a syndrome which manifests itself in major learning delays and challenging behaviours. He is mainstreamed in a Year 8 class. The teacher and the other students try to include him but I have watched his face and seen bewilderment turn to sullenness and finally anger as he tries to make sense of the world around him. Eventually the rest of the class members just get on with their work and ignore him. Then at best he will sulk in sullen isolation, clear out of the classroom and disappear if there's no teacher aide to follow him or at worst lash out physically at someone he perceives as annoying him.

A few weeks ago I visited the school to observe his behaviour so that we could re-look at our behaviour management strategies. I was directed to the hall where all the seniors were assembled for a session of "Jump Jam". An enviably lithe and energetic teacher was out the front leading the group, beside the video screen and speakers. The session was in full swing, but where was Tom? I could hardly believe my eyes! There he was in the middle of the group leaping and prancing with an energy and enthusiasm I had never seen before, and a grin from ear to ear. Best of all, he took a breath from time to time to exchange giggling remarks with the boys on either side of him. For the first time, I was seeing him as part of a group, able to do what the others were doing and fully accepted as one of them. But what really stayed with me afterwards was the joy on his face.

CONCLUSION

We are fortunate nowadays to have registered music therapists and a tertiary training programme for them here in New Zealand. That is thanks to years of hard work, and repeated representations from the New Zealand Society for Music Therapy, and the tireless work of Morva Croxson of Massey University in particular. It is wonderful to have this course established and these skilled people available. But anyone with the will to do so can use music to help improve the achievements and brighten the lives of our children with special needs. Thank you to those of you who are doing it already and to the rest of you – go out there and have a go! It's definitely worth the effort!

Paula O'Regan, QSM



AUTHOR PROFILE

Paula O'Regan has worked as a classroom teacher, district music advisor (Otago), lecturer at Dunedin Teachers' College, Inspector Supervising Special Education (Auckland), and psychologist (Otago and Waikato). She presently works as a psychologist for GSE (Marlborough). In 2003, Paula was awarded the Queen's Service Medal for Community Service in the field of Special Education.

Email

paula.o'regan@minedu.govt.nz